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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 MOSCOW 000988

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: UNITED RUSSIA POISED TO WIN SOCHI ELECTION THANKS
TO COURTS, MEDIA, EARLY VOTING

REF: MOSCOW 789

Classified By: Acting DCM Alice G. Wells for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: An April 13-15 visit to Sochi revealed extensive intrigue, media coercion, and ballot manipulation in the lead-up to April 26 mayoral elections in the 2014 Winter Olympics host city. Contacts from all sides of the opposition spectrum, from Communists to liberal democrats, described machinations intended to prevent a run-off election and hand the race to United Russia. Key tactics used to ensure a victory have included shaping the ballot through an opaque registration process and so-called "political killers"; strict controls on media access; and potentially fraudulent early voting. Of the original 27 hopefuls, only six candidates remain registered, and United Russia candidate Anatoliy Pakhomov is now widely expected to win in the first round. Opposition candidate Boris Nemtsov, with his populist anti-Olympics platform, remains in second place in polling.
End Summary.

United Russia Win Expected in Thinning Electoral Field

¶2. (C) An April 13-15 visit to Sochi revealed extensive intrigue, media coercion, and ballot manipulation in the lead-up to April 26 mayoral elections in the 2014 Winter Olympic host city. Contacts in opposition parties, NGOs, and local independent newspapers all agreed that government interference was attempting to ensure a first-round victory for United Russia candidate (and former acting mayor) Anatoliy Pakhomov. Early April polling conducted on behalf of the International Republican Institute (IRI) confirmed that United Russia's efforts were paying off, concluding that Pakhomov, "with a very high degree of probability," will be Sochi's next mayor (see para 16).

¶3. (C) Our visit also coincided with the departure of three of the nine registered candidates from the ballot. Andrei Bogdanov removed himself from the race on April 13, while on the same day a Sochi court stripped billionaire oligarch Aleksandr Lebedev's candidate registration for alleged financial reporting errors. The following day, citing registration document errors, a Sochi court removed Just Russia candidate Viktor Kurpitko from the ballot. Six registered candidates remain: Anatoliy Pakhomov (United Russia), Boris Nemtsov (Solidarity), Yuriy Dzaganiya (KPRF), Aleksey Kolesnikov (LDPR), and the two so-called "political killers" Vladimir Trukhanovskiy and Pavel Emelyanenko.

Culling the Ballot With "Political Killers"

¶4. (C) Manipulating the ballot by denying candidate registration and shaping ballot text has provided the starting point for tilting the election in favor of United Russia. However, the electoral commission has not been the

only vector for denying candidates their registration. The April 14 ouster from the race of Just Russia's Kurpitko resulted from a lawsuit brought by fellow candidate Trukhanovskiy, whom Kurpitko branded a "politichiskiy killer" at a meeting just two hours after the court decision. When asked what Trukhanovskiy (a Krasnodar resident and director of InvestLend LLC) had to gain from kneecapping opposition candidates, Kurpitko rubbed thumb and forefinger and responded, "money, what else?" Such "political killers" (also called "technical candidates") do no actual campaigning -- Trukhanovskiy rated only 6.5 percent name recognition in IRI's survey -- and serve simply as a cat's paw for United Russia by attacking opposition candidates. (Note: Nemtsov campaign advisor Ilya Yashin claimed April 15 that he coined the Russo-English phrase "politichiskiy killer" in 2005 in reference to Moscow City Duma candidate Goldstein.) The freshly-ousted and clearly agitated Kurpitko fired repeated volleys against what he called a "corrupt" United Russia party machine "afraid of competition." When a radio journalist arrived to conduct an interview with him, Kurpitko continued with his strident rebuke, accusing United Russia of political skullduggery and of transforming Sochi over the past five years into a "cement monster" plagued with dreadful architecture. When the journalist stepped away, Kurpitko leaned in to clarify to us that he was certain the decision to oust him from the ballot originated in Krasnodar, not in Moscow. The Federal Supreme Court would revive his registration, he predicted.

¶ 15. (C) Aleksandr Lebedev responded less confrontationally to his ballot banishment, flying off to London and leaving his spokesman Artem Artemov to tell us April 14 that Lebedev

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would appeal the court's decision. The regional Krasnodar court, however, quickly upheld the Sochi court's decision on April 16 even before Lebedev had the opportunity to file his first appeal.

¶ 16. (C) The dispatching of Lebedev and Kurpitko followed the original culling of candidates by the city electoral commission. From an original collection of 27 hopefults, the commission denied registration to a motley menagerie of pensioners, porn stars, ballerinas, and local unemployed residents (reftel). That process also strategically denied City Council Deputy Speaker Vladislav Funtyakov, a popular local United Russia politician who had suspended his party membership to run for mayor as an independent. After embarrassing losses in March mayoral races in Smolensk and Murmansk, where United Russia members running independently defeated the party's official candidates, Funtyakov's ambitions likely proved too troublesome. Sochi Electoral Commission chairman Yuriy Rykov defended Funtyakov's registration denial by telling us April 14 that Funtyakov's registration documents had "serious problems."

¶ 17. (C) The Sochi ballot comprises not just candidate names but also supplemental information about them. Rykov shared a candidate information sheet that he said his commission would distribute to voters, which included all nine originally-registered candidates and provided detailed (if microscopically-fonted) histories about each contender. Also lying on Rykov's desk, however, and which he did not offer to share, was a draft copy of the ballot with his signature of approval at the bottom. Viewed only at a 45-degree angle, this ballot included next to Nemtsov's name nothing about his previous political experience or that he was born in Sochi; instead, his blurb briefly stated that he lives in Moscow, is an independent candidate, and works for a social fund.

Limited Media Access Gives United Russia Upper Hand

¶ 18. (C) Media limitations, about which all opposition candidates complained, have prevented any real debate among candidates. National broadcast media offer no opportunity

for candidates to appear in news stories or paid campaign ads, and reftel detailed how state-run NTV directed its reporters to "ignore the Sochi elections completely." Electoral Commission chairman Rykov dismissed opposition complaints, explaining that private channels are free to decide for themselves what to air. By law, candidates receive brief three or seven-minute pieces of airtime, but opposition campaigns called this a hollow sop compared to the daily news stories about Pakhomov's visits to local businesses and farms. Perhaps encouraging voters to embrace familiarity, President Medvedev referenced the Sochi election in his April 15 Novaya Gazeta interview by remarking that "people almost always choose in favor of known politicians and not for well-known stars." IRI's survey revealed that Pakhomov led Nemtsov in name recognition (80 percent to 74 percent), with Lebedev in a distant third with 26 percent.

¶9. (C) Downtown Sochi was bereft of campaign ads, even for United Russia. A few Lebedev posters that somehow escaped the previous week's massive purge (since they depicted the candidate standing next to Putin) and three lonely KPRF stickers on the city's outskirts were the only signs of political advertisement on the streets. Nemtsov has relied on print ads in small independent newspapers, and his in-person events have largely been limited to visits to markets and parks.

Early Voting And Little Oversight

¶10. (C) Vote manipulation and official interference constitute a third tactic for ensuring a United Russia victory. According to Golos Foundation's Mikhail Veligodskiy, early voting would allow authorities to skirt electoral oversight while ensuring a favorable turnout. Media reported that nearly 1,500 ballots were cast on the first day of early voting on April 15, with another 1,400 cast on the following day. Although the electoral commission's Rykov insisted that early voting was instituted at the request of "entrepreneurs and businessmen who are too busy to go to the polls," press reported that those voting April 15 overwhelmingly were employees of hospitals, schools, and local hotels who had been bused in just to vote. Four opposition campaigns (Nemtsov, Dzaganiya, Kurpitko, and Lebedev) complained immediately on April 15, alleging voter coercion. The Electoral Commission's Rykov estimated that early votes would constitute only 5 percent of all votes cast.

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Nemtsov Campaign Endures Despite "Krasnodar's Surkov"

¶11. (C) Boris Nemtsov, who has endured provocations in Sochi ranging from an attack with ammonia-laced cola to the confiscation of 125,000 campaign flyers, has continued to run a spirited if little-seen campaign. Nemtsov's campaign advisor, Ilya Yashin, alleged widespread official interference originating in Krasnodar, where regional vice-governor Murat Akhedzhak wields tight control over media and the electoral commission. Previously, Nemtsov revealed to an April 12 press conference that Akhedzhak had asked him to refrain from criticizing Krasnodar Governor Tkachev in exchange for a promise to consult authorities about granting Nemtsov television airtime. Golos' Veligodskiy called Akhedzhak "Krasnodar's Surkov," referring to Kremlin deputy chief of staff Vladislav Surkov, while Yashin scorned Akhedzhak as a "maniac" who would do anything to advance his own position. Forcing a second round is Nemtsov's only measure of success, Yashin explained, since without an official party registration the Sochi mayoral race represents "the only election that Solidarity will see itself on a ballot."

¶12. (C) Seeking a more populist tack to attract voters, Nemtsov has made the 2014 Winter Olympics a cornerstone of

his campaign. Nemtsov and fellow Solidarity leader Vladimir Milov drafted a report claiming that Sochi will be unable -- infrastructurally, ecologically, and financially -- to host the Games, and they proposed holding events in cities throughout Russia. However, IRI's survey revealed that 55 percent of Sochi residents do not support splitting up the Games, suggesting that Nemtsov's desire to oppose Pakhomov on a high-visibility issue may not translate into votes on April 26. Acting Mayor Stroyev brusquely dismissed Nemtsov's Olympics proposal to us as "stupid and unprofessional."

Predictions: High Turnout, United Russia Victory

13. (C) A survey conducted April 4-7 on behalf of IRI and released April 16 reported that nearly 69 percent of those polled said they would vote in the election, and 45 percent responded that Pakhomov was their first-choice candidate; Nemtsov was first choice for 8 percent of respondents. Nemtsov was the second-choice candidate of 9 percent of survey respondents, which was the most of any candidate but a small fraction of the 73 percent who responded "I Don't Know." Suggesting wide voter skepticism of the opposition candidate, Nemtsov topped respondents' list of candidates who do not deserve the mayor's job, with 18 percent -- about 14 percent higher than the next highest candidate.

14. (C) Opinions varied among opposition candidates as to whether there would be a second round, but every campaign acknowledged that a United Russia victory was predetermined. Just Russia's Kurpitko predicted that Pakhomov would win in the first round, with Nemtsov taking 10 percent and the Communists 12 percent. Authorities would not exclude the latter two, Kurpitko added, because their participation allows the government to say that voters themselves had dismissed the candidates as "political corpses." KPRF's Dzaganiya capped Nemtsov's support at 5 percent, explaining that "Nemtsov is seen as a Yeltsin guy" because of his government role leading up to the 1998 default. Pakhomov, according to Dzaganiya's forecast, will receive at most 33 percent of the actual vote, but electoral fraud will rule out the need for a second round. Golos' Veligodskiy agreed that there would not be a second round, adding with a long view that the opposition has no chance in Sochi for at least 10 more years -- when the Olympics have long passed.

15. (C) Electoral Commission chairman Rykov estimated that total turnout for the election would be 40-50 percent, slightly above the 43 percent turnout for the previous municipal election. Among voters, Rykov predicted that turnout among youth (under 30) would be 25-28 percent, while among the more politically active over-60 demographic it would reach approximately 60 percent. On election day, a voter hotline will field complaints and questions from citizens. Golos' Veligodskiy remarked that there will be no way to guarantee an accurate turnout at the polls, even with Golos observers in place on April 26. On election day, Golos will cover about 7 percent (15 out of 211) of polling places during opening and vote tabulation, while visiting most of the remaining polling places during voting hours.

Comment

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16. (C) With preliminary polls giving Pakhomov only 40 percent of the vote, United Russia likely will ratchet up his media presence in the final campaign week and introduce media pieces painting Nemtsov as corrupt, a Western stooge, or an outsider from Moscow. Turnout in early voting and on April 26 will ultimately decide whether Pakhomov needs a second round to win, but the intensity with which United Russia is waging this campaign indicates that a second round is not an option for regional and city leaders. The machinations described above have ensured that the election will not be

fair; the transparency of election day monitoring, although shedding no light on early voting results, will determine whether it has been free. All indications now point to "no."
BEYRLE